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Army reports sharp rise in Soviet efforts to recruit its personnel as spies

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. Army recorded nearly 700 potential espionage contacts worldwide involving soldiers and civilian employees during the last fiscal year, with about 20 percent of them proving serious enough to warrant investigation.

According to the Army, the reports of contacts that it receives ... from questions from strangers in bars that seem out of the ordinary to flagrant solicitation by foreign spies.

More than 70 percent of these reports are generated by an Army program called SAEDA (Subversion and Espionage Directed against the Army), which alerts the service's members and employees that they may be targets for espionage.

Of the 700 contacts reported in fiscal 1984, nearly 500 — more than half of them in the United States — were reported under SAEDA, and about a fifth were deemed worth investigating. The remaining 200 reports were received from other "counterintelligence reporting," which the Army declines to identify further.

The SAEDA-spawned investigations "positively identified operatives from hostile intelligence services," although the Army says the actual number of such identifications is classified. The FBI estimates that there are between 750 and 1,000 diplomats, businessmen and journalists from communist-controlled countries who are actively working for their intelligence services in the United States.

The number of reports made under the SAEDA program has increased 400 percent since 1978. The Army attributes the increase both to heightened awareness of the danger of espionage and to an increase in attempts by hostile services to turn Army men and women into spies.

Neither the Air Force nor the Navy makes similar figures available, but if the Army's experience is typical, reported potential espionage contacts serious enough to warrant investigation could number in the hundreds each year.

All three services are attempting to find better ways to fight spies within their ranks after the revelation of the so-called Walker spy ring of present and former Navy men who allegedly sold sensitive secrets to the Soviets for 15 to 18 years without detection.

The reputed spy master, John A. Walker, Jr., a retired chief warrant officer, was apparently turned in to the FBI by his ex-wife, who had known of his activities for many years before reporting them.

Had Mr. Walker kept his dual life from his wife, some say, he might still be operating.

All that a Soviet spy in the U.S. military need do to elude capture is keep his nerve, behave normally and be cautious about his contacts with his Soviet case officer, says a man who for 10 years "spied" for the Soviets while working at the direction of Army counterintelligence.

That glum assessment of a spy's chances of being caught came in congressional testimony from "Sergeant Smith," a 15-year Army veteran who told his story while seated behind a screen to protect his identity.

Had he been a real spy, Sergeant Smith told senators, "I don't really think I would have been caught unless I made a mistake. It is important to understand that there is really no fail-safe safeguard if a spy is cautious and retains plausible behavior."

Beyond that, only U.S. penetration of the KGB, the Soviet secret police, would have unearthed his activities, he said, unless carelessness in "countersurveillance" would have exposed him if he had ever met with a KGB operative known and tracked by U.S. counteringelligence.

Little is publicly known about how Mr. Walker was allegedly recruited by Moscow as a young Navy enlisted man, but the story told by Sergeant Smith about his own "recruitment" by Soviet spies followed a script that U.S. counterintelligence agencies have come to regard as one of the standard approaches.

As a serviceman stationed in Bangkok, Thailand, Sergeant Smith belonged to a chess club and frequented a bar where chess was played. While he had no traits or ties, such as relatives in a communist-controlled country, that Moscow could readily exploit, his interest in chess and his habits gave the Soviets sufficient ground to initiate contact without alarming him.

A man who proved to be a Soviet agent cultivated Sergeant Smith's friendship and made a request for a military phone book, the first of a seemingly innocent string of requests for which Sergeant Smith — all the while keeping his U.S. superiors informed — was financially rewarded.

"His requests for material," the counterspy said of the Soviet agent, "evolved gradually from simply unclassified information to finally the most sensitive classified information I could get my hands on."

The way the Soviets dealt with Sergeant Smith was perhaps atypical in one respect: There was no coercion, such as a threat to expose him if he ceased to cooperate.

"The Soviets rely on money, ideology, compromise and ego. The acronym for that is MICE. And they use any one, or preferably a combination, of all those to get to people," Sergeant Smith said.

"They think all Americans are money-hungry. They believe money talks, and they think all Americans believe that. It is something they would use on anybody," he said.